

CUTTING CLASS: EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVES
ON TEACHER ABSENTEEISM IN BRAZIL

BY

KATRINA A. DEELY

THESIS

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Adviser:

Professor Bekisizwe S. Ndimande

ABSTRACT

According to research performed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2008, 32% of Brazilian teachers work in schools whose principals complain of constant teacher absences. This placed Brazil in 8th position out of 23 other OECD countries involved in the investigation¹. There are many factors that can explain why relatively high rates of teacher absenteeism exist. This thesis examines the relevance of such factors to the absenteeism problem in Brazil and presents additional causes for low attendance. I also evaluate how neoliberal ideology, the ‘feminization of teaching’ and the socio-economic and political contexts in Brazil have influenced current teacher conditions.

I have conducted interviews with teachers and administrators employed in the public school system in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Data reveal that consequences for absenteeism are considered to be too permissive, the working environment for many teachers in Brazil is unsatisfactory and the salary for teachers in Brazil is low. Additionally, poor health conditions plague the majority of teachers with absences and numerous absences are the result of damage to the vocal chords of teachers as well as exhaustion and fatigue due to stress². I conclude that low salary and low social value placed on the teaching profession in Brazil lay at the root of the issue, decreasing teacher motivation and commitment.

¹ “Pesquisa diz que professor falta muito”. *Diario de Pernambuco- Impressão*, 2010, www.diariopernambuco.com.br/includes/imprimir.asp, (accessed April 20, 2010).

² Takahashi, Fábio. “Professor da Educação Básica falta 5 dias por ano por problemas de voz” *Folha de São Paulo*, 2009.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT IN BRAZIL

Like most countries in Latin America, Brazil is characterized by a history of social inequality that has existed since the days of slavery. As a colony, Brazil had the largest slave population in the Americas (Hypolito, 2001). As a nation, in 2006, it was the most unequal country in terms of income distribution in Latin America and the third highest in the world (Love, 2009). Colonization, slavery, and the concentration of wealth and power with the elite class are characteristics of Brazil's history that have had a significant influence on Brazilian society in the 21st century. The confluence of these factors resulted in the creation of a high degree of economic and social inequality based on race and class, arguably the country's most salient issue.

Brazil was the last country in the Western world to abolish slavery in 1888 and faced with a large free black population, political elites were anxious to 'whiten' the population with increased immigration from Europe. Over time, Blacks were relegated to the lowest skilled positions due to racist preferences towards white labor in skilled sectors as well as the lack of literacy among the black population resulting from years in slavery (Andrews, 1991). Though these conditions for Blacks did not change as European immigration to Brazil diminished in the 1920's, visions of race in Brazil began to shift. In place of the long held notion among social scientists that Blacks represented a "degenerate race", a new school of Brazilian eugenicists supported and encouraged miscegenation in Brazil, promoting an idea of racial harmony and unity (Telles, 2004). Thus was created the notion of a "racial democracy" existing in Brazil; a subject that has been widely controversial since its inception and eventually labeled a myth by Brazilian scholars.

In 1933, thirty one years before the military dictatorship would take over, Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre introduced his book *The Masters and the Slaves* which would influence and continues to influence how Brazilians view race relations in their country. Freyre is credited with establishing the concept of ‘racial democracy’ which asserts that Brazil is free of legal and institutional impediments to racial equality and also of racial prejudice and discrimination, offering equality of opportunity for all (Andrews, 1991). While ‘racial democracy’ continues to be supported in many circles, it has increasingly been contested and labeled a myth by many critics. The critics of ‘racial democracy’ point out that racial inequality, in fact, is present in Brazil today. Black and dark men and women earn significantly less income than whites and black people are more concentrated in the North and Northeast regions of Brazil, which are the socially and economically least developed regions of the country (Hypolito, 2001).

The military dictatorship lasted from 1964 until 1985 and quelled the leftist attempts that were being made at the time to restructure Brazilian society into one that allowed for increased upward social mobility of the lower classes and increased racial equality. One of the dictatorship’s goals, besides altering the economic and political structures, was to “prevent class warfare through state-imposed racial domination (Reiter, 2009).” Though democracy returned to Brazil in 1985, the political sphere continues to be plagued by corruption, patrimonialism and nepotism and social inequality is pervasive (Love, 2009).

Confronted with these obstacles, and despite policies that would be adopted in the decades after the dictatorship to bring about more socio-political and economic equality, Brazil has been unable to reverse the inequalities. Entering into the final decade of the 20th century, Blacks were persistently underrepresented in relatively higher paying jobs (Reiter, 2009). Alternatively, the dominant classes continued to enjoy the privileges of political and economic

power. These are the groups “whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are White and of European origin (Hypolito, 2001). Thus, Brazilian society became typified by social exclusion with one-third of all Brazilians living in poverty, the majority of them non-White (Telles, 2004).

Education was one of the arenas where these social inequalities played out.

Internationally known and often referenced Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire lamented an educational system that perpetuated social inequalities in Brazil. In 1970, he introduced his most widely recognized book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. According to the most laconic of definitions, the book is a critique of Brazilian education. But more specifically and significantly, it is a response to Freire’s experiences as a teacher in Brazil and recognition of the socio-political inequalities and oppression that were being reproduced via the Brazilian education system. While teaching adult peasants, Freire became cognizant of the oppressive conditions being faced by poor and middle class families, not only in Brazil but internationally as well.

Thus, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a Marxist class criticism of the standing relationships between teachers, students and their societal conditions and calls for a new critical pedagogy that encourages students to become conscious of opportunities for freedom from oppressive authoritarianism. But while it is the student, that realizes his/her oppression and organizes the movement for liberation, who becomes the primary catalyst for social change in Freire’s analysis, he also stresses the primacy of the teacher in leading the student to that realization through dialogue. When speaking of the hungry peasants with whom Freire worked, he says “I must intervene in teaching the peasants that their hunger is socially constructed and work with them to help identify those responsible for this social construction... (Freire, 2000)”

Education reforms that took place in the 1990's under president Fernando Henrique Cardoso were an attempt to correct imbalances in opportunity existing since the dictatorship took power. However they were also partly in response to Brazil's need for a more highly-skilled and better-educated workforce to complement the country's increasing rates of economic growth post-dictatorship (Birdsall, 1996). Cardoso's new federal education policies were enacted in order to address the high degree of income inequality across regions and income levels primarily by increasing access to education among Brazil's poor children. Federal policies such as *Bolsa Escola* and *Fundef* were successful in increasing enrollment and attendance levels across the country throughout the decade (Love, 2009). *Bolsa Escola*, a cash transfer program which required regular attendance from students in exchange for money, and *Fundef*, which called for equitable distribution of education resources across states, were adopted by Cardoso from counties and state's whose mayors and governors were associated with the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* or Worker's party (PT), an opposing party to Cardoso's (Love, 2009).

When Cardoso's presidency came to an end, new hope for democratic participation from the lower classes was felt when Luis Ignacio (Lula) da Silva of the Worker's Party was elected president in 2002. Lula gained support from the working class of Brazil for his platform which announced a commitment to decrease income equality and improve social security programs (Love, 2009). Though Lula entered the presidential campaign with a fairly radical stance, he entered his term in office with a neoliberal set of economic policies, some of which were inherited from the previous Cardoso administration (Love, 2009). However Lula discarded Cardoso's priority for education in favor of his own priority for social welfare programs. During Lula's administration, the *Bolsa Escola* program was submerged into a broader *Bolsa Familia* social welfare program and education spending decreased (Love, 2009). Despite Cardoso's

lasting influence and Lula's concern for social welfare, many Brazilian policies after the dictatorship reflected the neoliberal ideology that had begun to take hold of political-economic policy making in the 1990's.

Neoliberalism, Markets and Education in Brazil

The neoliberal ideology is not only a Brazilian phenomenon, but an international trend that has influenced the public discourse in the past decades. Neoliberals are part of the rightist movement and believe in the power of the markets and privatization of the public sphere (Chomsky, 1999; Apple, 2001; Ndimande, 2006). Additionally, they believe that the individual holds the power to compete in the open market for economic success. Generally neoliberalism has shown to have an adverse impact on the economies of countries, especially those that are not economically strong in the first place.

Neoliberal policies in Brazil included, among other things, currency stabilization, tariff reduction and privatization of state enterprises (Love, 2009). Of these, privatization did much to increase the concentration of wealth distribution in Brazil, allowing groups that represent the interests of financial capital, multinational industry, big landowners, and rightists and neoliberal politicians developing conservative policies to become the dominant forces in Brazilian society (Hypolito, 2001). Privatization and other neoliberal policies had and continue to have a significant impact on many sectors and institutions in Brazil. One institution that has been especially effected by neoliberal policies such as privatization, and more importantly, one that in itself has great implications for the reproduction of social inequalities in Brazil, is education.

The privatization of education in Brazil is not an entirely new phenomenon however. The private sector has traditionally played a major role in providing education in Brazil. Even though

over 80% of Brazilian students attended public schools in 2009, the elite have traditionally avoided the public school system (Reiter, 2009). Preference for private education among the elite is deeply rooted in the country's socio-economic history (Birdsall, 1996). In order to understand the state of Brazilian education today, it is important to understand the role that severe social inequality and elite influence has played in the shaping of the institution.

Until around the 1950's, public schools were most widely attended by the privileged classes. However beginning in the sixties, public schooling became accessible to all. During this period of expansion in public education, both enrollment and attendance increased but the public schools were unable to accommodate the increase in students. A lack of space and shortage of teachers, paired with decreases in quality instruction, lowered the overall quality of primary and secondary public education (Birdsall, 1996). Wealthier families removed their children from public schools and began investing in private education (Reiter, 2009). Thus, private schools provided an outlet for overcrowding in public schools and became the destination for quality education for those families that could afford it. Over the next two decades, enrollment in private schools grew faster than in the public school system (Birdsall, 1996).

However since the 1950's, debates surrounding the role of private schools in the Brazilian education system have been prevalent. The focus of the conflict has been over the subsidization of private education with public resources (Birdsall, 1996). Private schools receive public money through direct and indirect transfers from federal and state governments (Reiter, 2009). Private schools are exempt from income and wage taxes. Also state and local governments 'purchase' school places and students receive scholarships for private school tuition (Birdsall, 1996). Additionally, public authorities regulate private school fees. These policies contribute to the deterioration of public schools by depriving them of potential revenues and

encouraging parents away from public schools in favor of private schools (Birdsall, 1996). The end result is that public schools earn the reputation of schools for the 'poor' (Reiter, 2009).

There is only one level of public education in which this trend is reversed, and that is higher education. Public universities in Brazil do not charge tuition because they are highly subsidized by the government (Birdsall, 1996). However, this does not mean that public universities are accessed by the same students that attend public primary and secondary schools most often. In the early 1990's and estimated 23% of all public expenditure was allotted to higher education institutions but only 2% of all college aged students were enrolled in a public university (Reiter, 2009). The majority of this small percentage of students attended private primary and secondary schools, generally the schools that provide a better education. Additionally, the entrance exams for public universities are very competitive. Therefore, offering 'free' public university "provides a public subsidy to those least in need of it...in a way that systematically favors the privileged at the expense of those most need in public assistance (Birdsall, 1996)".

Thus the situation remains: at the primary and secondary levels, wealthy Brazilian households send their children to private schools and the quality of public schools continues to deteriorate. Wealthy students are better prepared for the competitive entrance exams to the free public universities and the students who could not afford a private education are crowded out. The number of private universities did grow after the increased demand for higher education since 1960 but it is the working class and poor students who are most likely to attend these universities which also charge fees (Birdsall, 1996). Therefore poor students have to pay more for a lower quality education at the unsubsidized private universities.

Needless to say, there are much needed improvements to be made in Brazil's education system. And while specific issues exist at all levels of education, each one contributes to a much bigger and overarching problem: the reproduction of elite status among a small portion of the population. Higher socioeconomic status is quite clearly associated with greater success in enrolling in a private school and the securing higher quality education (Birdsall, 1996). Such a large educational quality gap perpetuates Brazil's unequal income distribution. The repetition and dropout rates among poor children are much higher and they never acquire the education necessary to compete for higher earning careers (Birdsall, 1996).

Teaching in the Midst of Transition: Society, Politics and Economics

Returning briefly to the work of Paulo Freire, it is worth mentioning again that the teacher, along with the student, is a critical component of Freire's analysis and also a member of 'the oppressed'. In the last decades of his life, Freire was witnessing the increasing influence of neoliberal ideology on teachers, and on education in general, in the 1980's and 90's. A new corporate-style bureaucracy was taking hold in which effectiveness, efficiency, and the economic management of human and capital resources became the hallmark of public sector activity. In education especially, there was a shift from an emphasis on welfare, equity and social justice to one of "new managerialism" with a concern for efficiency, cost-effectiveness and competition (O'Brien and Down, 2002). The marketisation and centralization of control that was characteristic of this transformation resulted in the devaluation of public goods and services such that the perception was created that anything public is 'bad' and anything private is 'good' (Apple, 2005).

These positivistic and management models of education were beginning to redefine the role of the teacher as well. Through curriculum and administrative techniques, the teacher became the subject of external control seeking to “guarantee standardized outcomes and behaviors (Apple, 1986)”. Teaching became characterized by standardization, rationalization and auditing in which the teacher is constantly expected to produce efficient outcomes (Apple, 2005). The culture of teaching was shifted from one of knowledge sharing and teacher-student interaction into one of individual responsibility for delivering outcomes and pursuing corporate visions (O’Brien and Down, 2002).

Michael W. Apple, author of *Teachers & Texts* first published in 1986, echoes Paulo Freire with his own culturalist Marxist interpretation of teachers and education. Apple explores the relationship between class, gender and teaching and shows how capitalism has led to the growth of economic and political inequalities. He, like Freire, comments on how schools, curriculum and teaching are being pressured to conform to economic needs by the powerful elite. A large part of Apple’s work is an examination of how teaching evolved into ‘women’s work’ and how this resulted in the “deskilling, reskilling, intensification, and resistance” among 20th century teachers (Apple, 1986). Apple describes the process of the “proletarianization” of teacher’s work that began around 1960 in which teachers began to have little control over their labor and experienced decreased levels of autonomy (Apple, 1986).

For Apple, many of the conditions faced by teachers in modern education systems around the world are also the result of the historical gendered aspects of teaching and the proletarianization of the occupation that began decades ago. Sexist attitudes and the tendency to care less about women’s working conditions in the past have influenced the teaching experience for many teachers, both men and women. Teachers are now increasingly less connected to, in

less control of, and unable to rationalize their own work (Apple, 2005). But whether it is neoliberalism, or the gendered proletarianization of labor that has most affected teachers, there is evidence that market based economic reforms in education over the past several decades have negatively affected teachers.

Economic rationalism and corporate style reforms have devalued the knowledge and experience of teachers, as policy seems to reflect a prioritization for cost-cutting and less for educational values. This has led to schools being inadequately resourced by the government and left teachers with little tools for teaching. Additionally, pedagogical legitimacy has suffered as those actually in charge of setting the curriculum and transferring resources to schools are far removed from the reality of the classroom (O'Brien and Down, 2002). Instead of individual schools feeling responsibility for their own governance, educational management has taken on a top-down approach. The end result is that teachers' self esteem is stripped from them, they receive little recognition for their work, stress is increased and teacher morale is decreased (O'Brien and Down, 2002).

Brazilian teachers are not excluded from this phenomenon, as developed and developing countries alike have been touched by the globalization of neoliberalism.³ Since the 20th century, maintaining an adequately sized and well-prepared workforce of teachers in Brazil has been a challenge. On one hand, there has been a severe shortage of teachers in the public school system, especially in the areas of math and science (Reiter, 2009). Many classrooms in Brazil stand empty as they are unable to be filled by certified teachers in those areas. On the other hand, public schools in Brazil have faced high rates of teacher absenteeism, in which employed personnel choose not to attend work for multiple days (Rogers and Vegas, 2009). There are

³ For neoliberalism in England, see Ball (2003); in South Africa, see Ndimande (2006); and Namibia, see Zeichner and Ndimande (2008).

various factors that go into explaining this situation and the issues regarding teacher self esteem and morale mentioned above definitely have implications for the hiring of committed and well-trained teachers. This thesis focuses on one aspect of the situation in Brazil, teacher absenteeism, and explores the various influences on the problem.

According to research performed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2008, 32% of Brazilian teachers work in schools whose principals complain of constant teacher absences. This placed Brazil in 8th position out of 23 other OECD countries involved in the investigation⁴. Concern about teacher absenteeism in Brazil is just one aspect of the concern for the state of education in Brazil in general. Since 2000, student scores on basic skills tests have been among the lowest in Latin America. In 2006, Brazilian 15-year-olds tied for 49th out of 56 countries on the reading exam of the Program for International Student Assessment. More than half of the students scored in the bottom level in reading and results were even worse in math and science. Currently in some regions in Brazil such as the northeast, illiteracy rates are up to 30 percent.⁵

Purpose of the Study and the Importance

There are many factors that can explain why relatively high rates of teacher absenteeism exist in Brazil. Consequences for absenteeism are considered by many to be too permissive with teachers often not facing consequences for missing multiple days of work (Tavares, Camelo and Kasmirski, 2009). Also, the working environment for many teachers in Brazil is below satisfactory. Classrooms are lacking sufficient teaching materials and are overcrowded with

⁴ “Pesquisa diz que professor falta muito”. *Diario de Pernambuco- Impressão*, 2010, www.diariopernambuco.com.br/includes/imprimir.asp, (accessed April 20, 2010).

⁵ Alexei Barrionuevo. “Educational Gaps Limit Brazil’s Reach”. *The New York Times*, September 4, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/world/americas/05Brazil.html, (accessed September 27, 2010).

students. The salary for teachers in Brazil is low. Many teachers do not earn a living wage and are required to work in multiple schools in order to earn sufficient income to provide for their families (Rogers and Vegas, 2005). Additionally, poor health conditions plague the majority of teachers with absences. Numerous absences are the result of damage to the vocal chords of teachers as well as exhaustion and fatigue due to stress (Fernandes and da Rocha, 2008).

This study explores these various factors influencing teacher absenteeism using individual interviews that I conducted from June to August, 2010 with teachers and administrators employed in the public school system in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. A secondary aspect of the interview process was identifying teacher and administrator recommendations for possible solutions that would be most appropriate and effective in increasing attendance. The primary goal of this research was to identify the leading causes of teacher absenteeism in Brazil from teacher and administrator perspectives.

Therefore analyzing the data collected from this research, in order to identify the leading factors contributing to teacher absenteeism in Brazil today, comprises the first step in the process of better understanding the relationship between current conditions in Brazilian education and the absenteeism problem. An analysis of the data will provide answers to the following question: According to currently employed Brazilian teachers, what are the economic, social, political and environmental factors that contribute to absenteeism?

The second step in the process includes an analysis of certain historical processes, discussed previously in this introduction, that have contributed to current conditions. Thus, the contribution of the processes of the “feminization of teaching” and the influence of the neoliberal ideology in relation to education are also examined in an attempt to provide insight into the second overarching question that this study addresses: How have these processes contributed to

the existence of those economic, social, political and environmental challenges that the Brazilian teachers involved in this study identified during the interview process?

The importance of this research and the questions that it asks can be argued from two different fronts. First, an examination of the factors contributing to absenteeism can uncover measures that can be taken at the municipal, state and national level in Brazil to improve the situation. For example, the research shows that teachers confess to being absent multiple days during the year because they are aware that the nature of public employment allows such practices without a high degree of accountability and punishment for frequent absences. This then creates an opportunity for governments to focus on restructuring accountability measures within public employment in an effort to increase attendance.

Second, this research uncovers the lasting effects of a historically gendered profession and neoliberal policy in relation to education. While measures can be taken at the state and national level to improve the situation for teachers, by increasing teacher pay and improving the school environment for teachers as well as students, the implications of both neoliberalism and the feminization of teaching are well ingrained and difficult to reverse. This information suggests that ultimate solution will involve a restructuring of political, economic and social ideology that begins to truly value education as a public good of quality that is accessible to all citizens.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Research Site

Rio de Janeiro, as a research site, has several characteristics that make it an ideal location for research related to education in Brazil. As the country's second largest city, it offers a significant amount of heterogeneity, both in relation to the schools and demographics. Rio is located in neither the Northeast, with historically heavy African influence, nor in the South with overwhelmingly European roots. Instead, Rio de Janeiro falls somewhere in the middle with a noticeably equitable mix of African and European qualities. Similarly, it is almost never equated with the poverty of the Northeast, and is only sometimes included with the Southern states as Brazil's 'wealthy' region. However, the poor and rich extremes are seemingly omnipresent as Rio's expansive hill topping favelas loom over the four star hotels and condominiums along the city's famous beaches all around the city (Marx, 1998)⁶.

In terms of schooling, Rio offers a variety of public and private primary and secondary schools and universities. Responsibility for funding public schools in Rio de Janeiro is divided among the municipality, state, and federal government but often the lines become blurred when public money makes its way into private school budgets. The result is a confusing web of resource provision that engenders constant debate. Additionally, some of the best and worst public schools can be found in Rio de Janeiro. From federally funded universities with the best research facilities in the country to the state high schools which have trouble filling their classrooms with teachers, Rio offers a diverse population of schools. Thus when deciding the site of research for this project, the social and economic diversity as well as the variety of schools led

⁶ Marx's (1998) analysis demonstrates the social inequalities that exist in Brazil, including Rio de Janeiro.

me to the belief that Rio must also be home to a diverse population of teachers with which to explore the issue of teacher absenteeism.

Participants

The data collection process involved interviews with teachers and administrators currently employed in public schools in Rio de Janeiro. The participants included individuals employed in federal, state, and municipal schools⁷. The choice to include teachers and administrators in the participant pool while excluding other groups involved in public education, such as parents, students, and members of the state and municipal Department of Education, was based on the relative proximity of each of the groups to the central issue. For example, teachers are personally directly affected by the factors influencing teacher absenteeism; therefore they should undoubtedly be involved in the interview process. Administrators, while they experience many of the challenges presented to public educators outside of the classroom, are not subject to the same constraints that teachers face within the classroom.

However many administrators are former teachers and therefore are able to offer two perspectives. The first perspective is that of the former teacher who, throughout his or her career, was faced with the decision of whether or not to attend school on a given day for a given reason. The second is that of the school administrator who must decide what measures to take in order to decrease absenteeism among teachers in his or her school. As administrators are directly involved in setting school norms for accountability and establishing documentation requirements for absences, they are integral in constructing the relative level of job security or insecurity that

⁷ Public schools are divided into federal, state, and municipal jurisdictions. Public elementary schools are generally funded by municipal governments and public high schools are generally funded by state governments. Some elementary and high schools are financed solely by the federal government which also is responsible for providing public higher education.

frequently absent teachers may feel in a given school. As a result of the duality of their perspective, compared to that of the teachers with no administrative experience, the interview responses of the two groups would undoubtedly yield interesting results.

All teachers and administrators participated on a volunteer basis. The teachers were either recruited by email or personally approached at the school in which they were employed. The teachers that were contacted via email were not recruited following any sort of sampling criteria. However the gender distribution of these teachers did happen to be in relative proportion to the gender distribution within the teaching profession in Brazil, as the majority of Brazilian teachers are women (Werle, 2005). The distribution of teachers, contacted via email, working in elementary, middle, high schools and universities was also varied. While this variable distribution by grade level and gender was not a purposeful sampling, it was certainly the desired outcome.

The first issue with sampling however was based in the fact the majority of the teachers, with whom I was recruiting via email, were teachers working in schools in the downtown of Rio de Janeiro. Therefore I was required to travel just outside of the downtown proper in order to reach teachers in the schools lying on the outskirts of the city. In this case, I personally visited the school, with an approved letter of request⁸ to speak with teachers and administrators willing to volunteer their participation in an interview.

Some of the administrators that participated in the study were also recruited via email, in the same way that the teachers were, and an interview was arranged at their place of employment. In some cases however, I entered the schools or the union headquarters with an approved letter of request, but without a previously arranged appointment, and the administrators

⁸ The letter of request, interview protocol and survey, any additional recruitment materials including the research announcement and participant request used in email correspondence, as well as the research project itself was all approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois on March 26, 2010.

agreed to an interview. Prior to approaching these individuals, I was not aware of any of their demographic characteristics and did not employ any sort of sampling procedure in selecting these participants.

Thus, the interviews of eleven teachers, all audio recorded, were transcribed from Portuguese by myself and analyzed for this project⁹¹⁰. Of these eleven, four are male and seven are female, all varying in age and “race”¹¹. The interviews of six administrators, also audio recorded, were transcribed by myself and analyzed for the project; of the group of administrators, one was male.

During the interview process, the teachers were given a short survey. The survey was employed in the study primarily in order to obtain valuable information, related to the interview questions, without increasing the length of the actual interview. It requested specific quantitative information relating to their career: number of years teaching, number of students per classroom, length of time in travel to and from work, salary, number of children, among other factors¹². The survey and interview protocol were both constructed with questions that I considered necessary and appropriate for this study. The selection and inclusion of all questions was based on the information collected from the considerable amount of literature that I reviewed on the issue of teacher absenteeism in Latin America prior to traveling to Brazil. See below for a copy of the survey.

⁹ A total of fourteen teachers participated in interviews however I chose to remove three of them from analysis either due to the brevity of responses (often limited to one-word answers) and the lack of contribution to the body of data, or because the participant was unable to complete the interview due to time constraint.

¹⁰ All translations of quotations throughout this paper are my own and were taken from the personal interviews conducted from June to August, 2010 with participants whose names shall not be disclosed for purposes of privacy.

¹¹ Identifying “race” based on appearance is a complicated issue in Brazil due to the country’s history of miscegenation and modern conceptions of the word and its socio-economic implications. For this reason I use quotation marks and intend to imply that interviewees varied by skin color.

¹² See appendix “A” for a copy of the survey used in the interviews

The interviews on the other hand consisted of questions requesting more qualitative information: opinions of the work environment, relationships with colleagues and students, safety and security of the location of the school, attitudes regarding absenteeism, among other factors¹³. The decision to perform interviews grew out of the necessity to actively engage the teachers and interact with them as they described their experiences with the various factors that cause teachers to be absent from school. The “active” relationship that the interview permits, between myself and the interviewees, allowed me to obtain “a rich, in-depth experiential account”¹⁴ of the teachers’ lives as they negotiate the challenges that are presented to them within and outside of the school setting.

Open-ended style questions were used in order to allow the teachers to feel comfortable expanding upon the complications they confront on a daily basis, as further issues were likely to emerge within context of the situations as teachers continued to elaborate upon them. Teachers were also interviewed individually, as opposed to in a group, so as to avoid any feelings of self-consciousness that would lead to inaccurate responses. For example, a teacher may feel less compelled to discuss his/her absenteeism with a colleague present, as feelings of shame or guilt for being absent more often than a teacher with a higher attendance record might diminish disclosure to the interviewer. See below for a copy of the interview protocol.

Interviews with administrators were approached differently than those with the teachers. The administrators that were interviewed included two school principals, a vice principal, a secretary, a pedagogy coordinator, and the director of one of the teachers’ unions for teachers

¹³ See appendix “B” for a copy of the research instrument used in the oral interview

¹⁴ Fontana, A. and Frey, J.H. (2000). “The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Movement.” In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (ed). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. (3rd) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Pp. 695-727.

employed in the public school system in the state of Rio de Janeiro¹⁵. These individuals were not given the survey and the interviews did not follow a structured set of questions, however they were conducted on an individual basis. Instead they were asked to freely and openly discuss their views regarding the issue of teacher absenteeism in the public schools in Brazil.

Parameters

Certain considerations must be taken into account in regards to the selection of specifically teacher interviewees and their responses. The process by which participants were obtained necessarily contributes to the presence of interviewee bias in the results. In about half of the cases, the teachers contacted me with interest in taking part in the project after hearing about my research from colleagues or friends, or from a notice that distributed via email to various communities in Rio before my arrival. Therefore, I consider these teachers to be eager and willing to contribute to educational research and perhaps more committed to the teaching career than the average teacher. Evidence to support this is present in the results. Most of the teachers I interviewed had only missed one day of school in an entire year, with one teacher admitting that he misses once or twice a month.

Consequently when asked about the causes of teacher absenteeism, many teachers were forced to comment on what they believed to be the leading factors that influenced *other* teachers to be frequently absent. However this does not render the results useless. Even though all of the teachers claimed that they were hardly absent from school, most of them were teaching in schools where contributing factors to absenteeism existed, they were working closely with colleagues known for being absent often, and many of them were working in multiple schools in

¹⁵ School secretaries and pedagogical coordinators are normally considered school support staff and are not technically 'administrators' but for brevity purposes I will refer to them as administrators throughout this paper.

order to earn a living wage. Therefore, even though the teachers interviewed did not display high rates of absenteeism, they were still faced with the same constraints and conflicts that other teachers with higher absenteeism rates face on a day to day basis.

Figure 1. Survey

Researcher: Katrina Deely

Section 1: Questions related to your work

1. How many years have you been a teacher? _____
2. How long have you worked in this school? _____
3. Did you have another career before becoming a teacher? Yes () No ()
If yes, what other career(s) did you have?

4. How many students do you have in each class? _____
5. How many different groups of students do you have each day? _____
6. Are you a member of a teachers union? Yes () No ()
If yes, which one? _____
7. Do you have any other employment at this time? Yes () No ()
If yes, what is it? _____
8. What is your teacher *status* (concurado, etc)? _____
9. What is the location of the school where you work (which neighborhood)?

10. How long does it take you to get to work? _____
11. Are you satisfied with your salary? Yes () No ()
12. What is your salary? _____
13. Do you like working in the school? Please circle one number below.
Absolutely not Very much, yes

12345

Figure 1. (cont.)

Section 2: Demographic data

14. How old are you?

18-24_____ 25-39_____ 40-55_____ 56+_____

15. Are you a student? Yes () No ()

If yes, what do you study? _____

Where? _____

16. What is your civil status? Single () Married () Divorced ()

Separated () Widow () Other_____

17. Are you the only source of income in your home? Yes () No ()

18. Do you have children? Yes () No ()

If yes, please write the ages of each of your children

First child: Age _____

Others: _____

Second child: Age _____

Third child: Age _____

Fourth child: Age _____

Fifth child: Age _____

19. What is the highest level of education that you have?

Basic Education ()

High School Education ()

University Education ()

Certificate Degree Course ()

Bachelor ()

Master ()

Doctorate ()

Figure 2. Research Instrument

- 1) What is your opinion of the work environment at the school where you work (classroom, materials, the school building, etc.)?
- 2) What is your opinion of the location of the school where you work (how far you live from your work, security of the neighborhood, etc.)?
- 3) Do you get along with your principal? Your colleagues? The students?
- 4) Please describe the culture of absenteeism in your school (are there standards established by the principal, interdependence and trust between the teachers?).
- 5) How often do you miss work in a week or month?
- 6) Do you always document your absence with the administration?
- 7) What is the reason you use most to justify your absence?
- 8) Is this justification different from the real reasons for your absence?
- 9) Can you please describe the true reasons for your absence?
- 10) Do you believe that the gender of the teacher influences absenteeism?
- 11) Do you think that there is a negative consequence for the teacher not attending class (for the scholastic performance of the students, loss of salary, etc)?
- 12) Are you afraid of losing your job?
- 13) Why did you choose the teaching profession?
- 14) What are your specific career goals in this profession?
- 15) In your opinion, what are the most important causes that explain teacher absences in the public schools in Brazil?
- 16) In your opinion, what would be the best solution for reducing the number of absences of teachers in the public schools of Brazil?

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the teacher interview responses, I was able to identify a number of themes representing various factors related to teacher absenteeism. A number of the same topics of discussion appeared in the conversations with the administrators. However there were certain themes that arose in the interview responses of teachers, but not in those of the administrators, and vice versa. Likewise, the two groups differed in their respective opinions on the relative levels of significance of certain factors. This distinction is most notable when observing the difference between administrator and teacher opinions regarding the importance of salary, compared to other factors, in contributing to high levels of absenteeism. Categorized below are the themes, in no order of importance, which emerged in the research findings. The results are separated in correlation with the two respondent groups.

Emerging Themes among Teachers

Salary

Teachers and administrators alike quoted salary as one of the most significant representations of de-valorization of the teaching profession and an important disincentive for teachers. Teachers in Brazil make around \$500 Reais (just under \$300 USD) minimum per month from one teaching position; the salary varies according to employment in the municipal, state and federal systems. For this reason, so many teachers are required to obtain multiple jobs, sometimes in other schools and sometimes outside of education in order to support themselves and their families. Salary is a factor in absenteeism for a number of reasons.

First, the low salary forces teachers to accumulate jobs. This leads to a heavy workload causing fatigue and sickness. Second, teachers that miss more than the one allotted absence per month generally have a percentage of their salaries discounted for each day absent. However teachers agreed that the discounted value was so low, that it did not create a large enough disincentive to avoid being absent. Third, according to teachers and administrators the low salary helped popularize the perception and the attitude that teaching is a career with little value.

Since teachers in Brazil make a pittance compared to doctors and engineers, teaching is seen as a profession for people that “can’t do anything else”. It is almost impossible to overlook the fact that these issues of low salary and low esteem for teaching mentioned above are evidence of the process, again described by Apple (1986), of the “proletarianization” of teacher’s work that has existed since the 1960’s. This situation intuitively would do little to motivate almost any teacher to be committed to attending work every day.

Eight out of eleven teachers argued that increasing the salary of teachers should be the number one priority in the effort to decrease absenteeism. These teachers believed that higher salary would make it so that a) teachers would not have to accumulate so many jobs and could commit themselves to a fewer number of students and b) would feel more dignified and professional in their career and prepared to face the responsibilities of teaching. Two of the eight believed that increasing salary must accompany a comprehensive restructuring of the system and the provision of better working conditions. On the other hand, two teachers mentioned improving the structure before mentioning higher salary, or not mentioning it at all. Only one teacher believed that increasing teacher salary would not increase teacher attendance.

Class size

After salary, most teachers said that a restructuring process beginning with smaller class sizes, better working conditions overall and more attention and assistance from the government for public schools and public school teachers in primary and secondary education would be most effective in increasing attendance. According to teachers and administrators, increasing enrollment in schools, as a result of the Bolsa Escola and Bolsa Familia programs, in Brazil since the 1990's has caused an increase in class size. This has occurred in conjunction with the increased difficulty schools are having in staffing multiple classrooms, especially in the areas of math and science at the high school level, with qualified teachers (citation). Many teachers are faced with on average about 45 students, sometimes as many as 55 students in a classroom.

There is an abundance of research in teacher education showing that large class size has an adverse effect on teacher morale and motivation. For example, Bruhwiler and Blatchford (2009) argue that large class size inhibits the teacher from providing individualized attention to students. With too many students, the teacher is not able to evaluate the needs of each student and those students that may need extra instruction are not recognized. This is not to mention the fact that crowded classrooms and a lack of space decrease possibilities for group work, Socratic method¹⁶, and critical inquiry; all of which are teaching techniques that are strongly believed to have a positive impact on student outcomes (Bruhwiler & Blatchford, 2009).

Without the physical space with which to implement these practices, the effectiveness of pedagogy suffers, as does the teacher's confidence that his or her students will produce the necessary results. Especially in this age of neoliberal ideology, so much emphasis has been placed on testing at the national and international levels in order to gauge performance at the classroom level. This has resulted in ever-rising levels of pressure and blame being placed upon

¹⁶ An educational technique that utilizes critical thinking and oppositional discussion for learning.

teachers; significantly intensifying teacher's work, insecurity and stress, and stripping them of their self-esteem and morale (O'Brien & Down, 2002, Cochran-Smith, 2008).

Resources

Teachers complained that there is a severe lack of teaching and multimedia equipment such as books, music and video players, and quality desks and chalkboards. These examples represent cases in which there is a shortage of material. In other cases, the material is present but malfunctioning. One teacher claimed that in her school, there was only one functioning projector. As a result of this situation, several teachers that were interviewed attested to the fact that the goal of most teachers is to leave primary and secondary levels for the university level, where more resources are provided by the government, working conditions are better and professors are more respected and valued.

Research shows (O'Brian & Down, 2002, Cochran-Smith, 2008) that this is a direct result of the "new managerialism" and corporate style bureaucracy, discussed previously in the introduction, which took hold of the Brazilian education system and education systems around the world at the end of the 20th century. With the shrinkage in funding for public education since the 1990's, a consequence of neoliberal policy, the Brazilian government has been increasingly faced with the task of distributing scarce financial resources over basic, secondary and higher education. Thus, the government's preference for higher education is evidence that concern for efficiency, cost-effectiveness and competition now outweighs the value of welfare, equity and social justice. The current structure of Brazilian education filters underperforming and underprivileged students out of the system as they reach the university level. This is true because only the brightest and most well prepared students are able to compete for access to the scarce

positions at the best universities. Resulting from this situation is a cycle that reinforces the comparative advantage that the government has in investing more in higher education.

The desire for upward mobility within the teaching profession reflects the general absence of a sense of bonding and commitment to the schools. Returning again to the discussion of the emerging effects of neoliberalism on teaching in recent decades, this lack of commitment to the school and its students appears to serve as evidence of a shift in the culture of teaching. No longer is it the teacher's main priority to connect with the student on a knowledge sharing basis, rather it seems to have shifted towards one of individual interest (O'Brian and Down, 2002). This is indeed an idea supported by teachers themselves in their responses. According to one primary school teacher, "we (teachers) don't work FOR the school; we teachers work for our paycheck".

Geography

Being a teacher in Rio de Janeiro has implications of its own which differentiate the experience from that of other teachers in Brazil. Some characteristics of geography also had a negative effect on motivation for teachers in Rio.

- 1) Violence: In the context of Rio de Janeiro, violence is certainly a geographical issue as drug related violence, in particular, is concentrated in the hill-dwelling favelas¹⁷ across the city. Several teachers mentioned that drug trafficking and drug related violence in these areas had an effect on the security of the schools of those communities. In one case, a teacher spoke of the death of one of her students which caused teachers and students to avoid the school for a week. Other teachers commented on the regular sound of gunshots heard in the streets during school hours and frequent drug trafficking on school grounds. Also, many teachers mentioned that for schools located in or near the favelas, the local

¹⁷ "Favela" is the Brazilian Portuguese term for "slum" or "shantytown".

drug gangs had a direct influence on school attendance, notifying school officials when conflict was expected so that schools could dismiss students and teachers.

- 2) Heat: In Rio de Janeiro, as in other parts of Brazil, temperatures often reach above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Many classrooms in Brazilian schools are not air-conditioned. One teacher mentioned that only one building on the school grounds had air-conditioning. During the day, the classroom becomes very hot and students are not able to concentrate on instruction.
- 3) Size: The state of Rio de Janeiro is very large in size. For many teachers employed in the state system, the travel time in between work and home could reach up to 3 hours for some teachers who lived in the city but worked outside the city. While some were successful in acquiring monetary compensation from the ministry of education for travel expenses, all teachers had to make arrangements for the travel time. Some teachers made the commute each day and others made living arrangements during the week near their school and traveled home on the weekends.
- 4) Traffic: While public transportation in Rio is provided with buses and a metro, the bus system is confusing and many people continue to own cars within the city. This creates major problems of traffic congestion. For teachers working in more than one school, traffic and transportation was a major factor in keeping them from being able to maintain consistently high attendance at multiple job sites.

Gender

In the interview, teachers were asked whether or not the sex of the teacher influences absenteeism. The results from this question vary. Out of the four male teachers interviewed, two of them said that they did not believe that gender had an effect on absenteeism. One of the male teachers said that he believed that women are absent more often due to motherhood, although he did not specify what he believed to be the connection between motherhood and absenteeism. And one male teacher believed that women are absent more often because female teachers are at times afraid to confront the aggressive nature of some students in Brazil's schools. He believed

that those “aggressive” students have more respect for male teachers. No male teachers believed that male teachers miss more often.

The responses of the women are just as diverse. One female teacher believed that gender has no influence on absenteeism while four females believed that women are absent more for reasons of maternity. These four women said that maternity is a factor because generally in a family with children and two working parents, the woman will always miss work and stay home in the event that one of the children becomes ill. Two of these same women also said that women are absent more often because they are more sensitive and vulnerable to sickness, one of them citing the menstrual cycle as a cause of added sickness related absences. Finally, two women claimed that men are absent more often and both of their responses reflected the opinion that men are less committed to teaching.

One female pointed out that the teaching profession has traditionally been dominated by women and attributed it to the female’s increased sense of commitment and “care-taker’s” attitude, echoing Michael W. Apple’s (1986) argument that teaching became synonymous with “women’s work” in the 20th century. She also believed that men are “less disposed to be good at pedagogical functions” and have lower levels of dynamic participation within the school (participation in extracurricular activities). One female administrator also commented on the socio-cultural preconception that places a burden on women to be caretakers of the household. While she believed that she could sense a societal change in this, she believed that progress in this dimension was lagging behind other advanced countries.

Employment in the Public School System

Certain aspects of public sector employment in general actually create incentives to be absent, according to teachers.

- 1) Job stability: Several teachers highlighted the fact that employment in the public sector in Brazil is very secure and teachers feel a sense of job security. Many individuals choose a career in teaching because there are many positions available and firing teachers that are ‘concursado’¹⁸ for absenteeism is uncommon. One teacher explained that many teachers viewed the profession as a source of “sure money” and described the attitude of “permissiveness” towards absences in his school. In the words of this teacher, this attitude of permissiveness comes from the sentiment that “it [missing school] is not the worst thing a teacher could do...in the public school system.”
- 2) Procedures for documenting absenteeism: Additionally, the procedures for documenting absences are at the school’s discretion. While some teachers described the process of documenting absences with the school’s administration as very detailed with paperwork and the requirement of a doctor’s note for sickness, other teachers said that their school had no process for documentation and that absences were at times not acknowledged by the administration.
- 3) Work schedule: Another aspect of employment in the public school system that is a major source of absenteeism is the structure of the work schedule of the certified teacher. In the state and municipal systems in Brazil, a teaching job at one school consists of 16 hours of work; 12 classroom hours and 4 planning hours. Only in the federal system can teachers become employed for 40 hours a week in a single school. This means that teachers are required to seek employment in multiple schools, managing their hours into morning and afternoon shifts at more than one location. Most of the teachers I spoke to were employed in more than one school with some teaching at 3 or 4 different schools, in the public state and municipal, and private school systems. This type of structure created problems with teachers losing time for planning and getting stuck in traffic in transit between schools.

¹⁸ ‘Concursado’ refers to any teacher that is certified and has passed the three year probation phase obligatory for all new teachers.

Many teachers attested to experiencing constant fatigue and ultimately cited work schedule as a major cause for absenteeism.

Health and Wellness

Like the above factors, the influence of the health and wellness of the teacher on the number of absent days is also significant, as shown by interview responses. However this theme is different in that it does not exist independently from the other factors. Instead, poor health and wellness is the result of the confluence of most, if not all of the previously examined themes. The work environment, geographical challenges, nature of employment in the public school system and low salary all contribute to poor health and increased health-related absences.

On average, Brazilian teachers in elementary education miss 5 days a year due to vocal chord problems.¹⁹ Several teachers interviewed cited depression, stress and fatigue as common justifications by teachers for absent days. Overcrowded classrooms, hours spent in transit hurrying from one school to the other, and at times disruptive and disrespectful students all seemed to have significant effects on the health of the teacher as evidenced by the interview responses.

Topics of Discussion among Administrators

Unlike the teachers, administrators did not believe that increasing salary should be the number one priority for increasing teacher attendance. Some referenced the fact that teachers in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro have the largest municipal teacher salary in Brazil and the second largest in Latin America. Overall, they felt that teachers should not allow salary to

¹⁹ Fábio Takashaki. "Professor da Educação Básica falta 5 dias por ano por problemas de voz", *Folha de São Paulo: Jornal e Educação*, 24 August, 2009, www.anj.org.br/jornaleeducacao/noticias/professor-da-educacao-basica-falta-5-dias-por-ano-por-problemas-de-voz.html (accessed April 20, 2010).

influence their level of commitment and quality of work with the students and that success is measured by pride in your work and performance as opposed to salary. In the words of one school principal, “you should already be doing your work with students as if you were a millionaire”.

The administrator that made the above comment is the principal of a middle school on the outskirts of the city of Rio de Janeiro. At the time of the interview, she had also a second career as a lawyer. This situation highlights the general difference that exists between the beliefs held between teachers and administrators in relation to the teaching profession. Administrators as a whole feel that teachers should set their qualms with salary aside while they focus on providing the highest quality instruction possible to the students. After all, it is not the fault of the student that the teacher’s salary is less than desirable. Therefore students should not suffer poor education as teachers continually are absent from school, claiming that salary is a primary cause for their low attendance.

However as individuals such as the principal-lawyer above, who make comparably better salaries than that of a teacher without supplemental income, ignoring low salary for the sake of good education might be a reasonable proposition in theory, but certainly not in practice. For a teacher, salary represents much more than just the size of one’s house and the quality of one’s clothing. A teacher earning a low salary must sacrifice a number of necessities that affect the ability of the teacher to teach well.

For example without sufficient salary, teachers must work during vacation time and give up rest in order to supplement their low income, causing them to become exhausted and fatigued. Teachers may be required to forego certain health examinations or procedures due to their inability to pay, increasing their likelihood of becoming ill. Low income might also make it

impossible for teachers to purchase chalk, notebooks and other materials for the classroom that are sparsely provided by the government, and are necessary for teaching effectively. Therefore it seems untenable that teachers be asked to set salary concerns aside, as salary has the potential to affect the quality of instruction on so many levels.

The only administrative representative out of the six to be interviewed that believed that raising salaries should be the most important and effective solution was the director of the teacher's union. This striking divergence from the majority of administrator opinions regarding salary can be explained by the basic role and mission of labor unions in Brazil. First, Brazilian legislation has historically been in staunch support of workers' rights. The outdated CLT, *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (Consolidation of Labor Laws) written in 1943, provides unions with considerable power in the courts against employers.

Therefore, teachers' unions have traditionally claimed to be aligned directly with teacher interests and in constant battle with the Brazilian Ministry of Education over higher salaries. Second, Brazil is included in the growing list of countries across the globe currently resisting the neoliberal influence on labor unions. The neoliberal ideology favors limiting the power of unions in favor of market forces for determining wage levels. Teachers' unions in Brazil, then, are contending with the added power of neoliberalism in the fight for teachers' rights especially in the area of salary.

Thus, when asked their opinion on what *would* be the best method for reducing the number of absences of teachers in Brazil's public schools, nearly all administrators responded as follows: improve the cultural valorization of the teacher in Brazil by *first* introducing non-pecuniary incentives such as better working conditions and opportunities for professional development and *then* by increasing salary.

Therefore, the central issue running through administrator responses revolved around the fact that there is a general lack of valorization for the teaching profession in Brazil. According to administrators, the lack of value for teachers is reflected today in poor working environments as well as many of the other factors mentioned by the teachers. The lack of support and materials, large class sizes, and rigorous work schedule are all the result of low cultural value for the profession as they represent a lack of prioritization from government policy and funding. Apple (2005) argued that these conditions also represent the historical feminization of teaching and tendency to care less about women's working conditions in the past.

Most administrators agreed that what teachers need most is a lighter work load, more time for planning and rest and time to study and further their own education and professional development. These incentives would decrease stress levels, reduce physical and emotional illness and lead to less absences. But this is not to say that administrators failed to recognize that the low salaries for teachers in Brazil were partly responsible for keeping the majority of promising and well prepared individuals from choosing a career in teaching in favor of higher paying careers.

First, non-pecuniary incentives must be implemented in order to improve teachers' feelings of self worth and commitment; a strategy meant to reverse the effects of economic rationalism and corporate style reforms discussed previously by O'Brien and Down (2002) that stripped away teacher's self esteem, morale and sense of recognition. From an administrator perspective, this will attract more qualified individuals to the profession. With more qualified professionals that can be held to higher standards and be subject to more rigorous training, a rationale for increasing salary could then emerge. Theoretically, as working conditions and salary increase, so too would the cultural value placed on teachers and the teaching profession.

The end result would be a new Brazilian education system no longer plagued by excessive teacher absenteeism.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

From teacher and administrator responses it is apparent that there is an extensive collection of environmental, economic, political and societal factors that influence teacher absenteeism in Rio de Janeiro's public schools. Interviewing both teachers and administrators provided comprehensive outlook on the situation, as both groups touched on a broad range of issues. However the greatest value in interviewing the two groups exists not in the range and scope of responses that they provided. Perhaps of greater importance was the fact that, through the dichotomous perspectives, I was able to ascertain the difference in attitude and priority with which each group regarded the different issues.

For example, I could see through interview responses that teachers had a tendency to highlight specific, quotidian impediments that they confront on a daily basis, such as traffic, safety and financial struggles as challenges in their career. On the other hand, administrators seemed to look at the bigger picture in terms of the situation of teachers in Brazil. In their responses, the administrators dealt with larger problems, emanating from the core of the education issue. This is evidenced with the priority that they placed on improving the social and cultural value of the teaching profession; to reverse the cultural shift that occurred in teaching decades ago that changed the social perception, not only of the individual who becomes a teacher, but also the role of the teacher in the broader scope of Brazilian education.

Therefore each of the factors that contribute to teacher absenteeism must be evaluated and analyzed from a unique critical standpoint, since they are not regarded with equal significance by Brazilian teachers and administrators. This chapter discusses each of the factors

cited in chapter three and their relevance in the broader context of the main historical influences elaborated upon in chapter one. Though each of the factors is related to the larger processes of neoliberalism, the feminization of teaching, as well as the socio-economic and political contexts in Brazil, each is relative in varying degrees of strength and pertinence specifically to the issue of teacher absenteeism in the public school system in Brazil.

For example, the environmental factors, especially large class size and lack of resources, clearly are influential as the majority of both teachers and administrators cited these as important in the creation of unsatisfactory working conditions. These factors also exhibit the effects of neoliberalism as the absence of teachers to fill empty classrooms and the lack of teaching materials are a sign of inadequate funding for public education. However class size, and to a lesser extent resources, together with issues of heat, violence and the traffic within the city are not specific to public schools. These are universal factors that do not discriminate between public and private. Private schools and private school teachers are also subject to these impediments that make arriving to work and providing effective instruction to be a challenge.

Likewise, the effect of gender on absenteeism, based on this research, is somewhat inconclusive. While it is obvious that female teachers of child-bearing age will miss, on average, more days of school than male teachers (assuming that male teachers are absent only for health reasons), it is hard to say from the interview responses whether or not there are other gendered characteristics that influence higher rates of absenteeism of one particular sex. Some teachers, both male and female, asserted that the fragility of women in the profession is a cause of higher absenteeism among female teachers, as they are less able than male teachers to handle violent or unruly students. However other female teachers *and* administrators firmly rejected this theory and claimed that male teachers, being less committed to teaching and to the students, are more

likely to be absent. They claimed that this factor alone causes absences among male teachers that far exceed motherhood related absences for female teachers.

While the data alone is not sufficient to prove that male teachers are absent more often than female teachers, or vice versa, it does create a context in which to discuss the influence of the “feminization of teaching” on interviewee responses. The fact that the majority of female teachers stated in the interviews that female teachers are more apt to perform better than male teachers in pedagogical functions, and that the female’s caretaker’s attitude makes her more suited than males for a profession in education, is testament to the lasting impact of the “feminization of teaching” on the teaching profession in Brazil.

Just as teaching evolved into “women’s work” nearly one hundred years ago, women in the profession continue to believe that the situation, in many ways, has not changed. Even though there are a significant proportion of male teachers today, the perception among many that teaching is a woman’s profession perhaps is continuing to fuel the process of the “proletarianization” of teacher’s work (Apple, 1986). Will the *machista* attitude that continues to permeate Brazilian society today proceed in placing constraints on work, such as teaching, that is largely performed by women? Together with the effects of neoliberalism, a process that, similar to that of the feminization of teaching, also makes individuals the subjects of external control, it is possible that teachers will continue in the future to have less control over their labor and decreased levels of autonomy, as well as low salaries.

Ironically however, there is one aspect of teaching in the public school system that deceptively seems to lag behind in becoming entrenched in neoliberal ideals. The nature of public sector employment, with its attitude of permissiveness, lack of accountability measures

and complicated shift schedule obviously is a source of distinction. But the public sector has not become immune to the neoliberal influence, quite the contrary.

The growth of the private sector in Brazil is becoming the focus of attention for economic advancement. While the private sector enjoys financial support from private corporations, and in some cases the government, the public sector is left behind fighting for scarce financial resources. Budget cuts throughout the public sector are a sign that the Brazilian government is relinquishing, to some extent, its fiscal responsibility, an unmistakable signal of the presence of neoliberalism. This influence of neoliberal policies in education (Apple, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2008; Zeichner and Ndimande, 2008), is indeed evidenced in the discussion with teachers and administrators. As Apple (2001) reminds us, neoliberalism has launched an attack on public institutions. Supporters of neoliberalism are against spending on public services because they believe that spending on these institutions is a waste of money. Instead they are favoring of privatization, an ideology that believes in the ideology of the market.

Connected to the presence of a lack of funding in the public sector, is the work schedule situation faced by public school teachers. In the state and municipal schools, teachers are hired on a part time sixteen hour per week basis. Twelve of the hours are spent in the classroom and four are reserved for planning. These schools do not have the money to hire teachers on a full time forty hour per week basis, because by law, employers in Brazil are required to offer full time employees a minimum yearly salary. In order to avoid extra expenses, the municipal and state school systems hire a teacher only part time, which means that teachers must accumulate teaching positions, or jobs outside of teaching, in order to supplement their income.

Only in the federally funded schools, which receive a higher percentage of the education budget from the government, are teachers hired full-time. In such a situation, exacerbated by the

increasing shrinkage in funding in the public sector, teachers face added obstacles as they rush from school to school trying to make multiple shifts. They sit for hours in traffic, or must travel across the city. They lose their planning hours and as a result they must plan during their off-hours, time that should be spent for rest and leisure. Inevitably exhaustion sets in, and the motivation and energy to teach is lost.

Physical and mental health and wellness is a very pertinent factor, and it is often the end result of the confluence of many other factors, such as the one cited above, that ultimately cause a teacher to be absent. An intensive work schedule, lack of time off of work, and hours spent in transit can greatly impact the health and wellness of the teacher, contributing significantly to high levels of teacher absenteeism. However by observing the responses from teachers and administrators, it is clear that there are two other factors, separate but related to each of those aforementioned, that lay at the heart of the issue: salary and the low social value placed on the profession. These factors arose with the most frequency in the interview process and are perhaps the two areas in which the perception of the problem of teacher absenteeism among teachers and administrators is most divergent.

Without a doubt many of the factors mentioned in this thesis, the environmental, political, economic and social, are interrelated. The lack of teaching materials and equipment that a teacher has available in the classroom is not only testament to the lack of depth in the educational budget; it says much more. The fact that public schools cannot afford quality materials, cannot provide their teachers higher salaries, and cannot attract enough well trained and committed individuals to fill the empty classroom and decrease current class sizes is evidence in itself that public education has not been allotted enough attention from those that have the power to improve the situation.

The poor state in which public education in Brazil finds itself today is absolutely symbolic of the lack of value and priority that is placed upon the institution and its personnel. Evidence of this lack of priority for education and value for teachers is manifest in the direct and indirect ways, in which neoliberalism and the “feminization of teaching”, as discussed along with gender previously in this chapter, have impacted current conditions. It is difficult to think of a way in which education has been spared from the effects of neoliberalism, as each of the ideology’s tenets can, in one way or another, be traced to a number of problems that are being dealt with in education today.

The economic management of human resources in order to achieve outcomes in the most efficient way possible is one example of neoliberal doctrine that can absolutely be seen in education. Teachers are expected to follow a standardized curriculum and method of teaching that leaves no room for creativity. Pedagogy has been transformed by neoliberalism from knowledge-sharing through various methods, to a process in which the teacher is individually responsible for delivering outcomes using a standard format. Should the outcomes be unsatisfactory, fault is placed on the teacher, as it is assumed that he or she did not convey the information appropriately.

The very individuals that are in charge of forming the curriculum and deciding the most effective pedagogical format are far removed from classroom realities. Many of the decision-makers have never taught in a school in a favela and perhaps have little experience even teaching in a public school. The distance that is created in between teachers at the ground level and those in charge of curriculum creates the sentiment and public perception that teachers are inferior and are not qualified to make curriculum and pedagogical based decisions. Instead, “experts” are needed in order to ensure that all of the conditions are set so that teachers may teach a certain

way, follow structured guidelines, and produce expected outcomes. Therefore individual schools are not responsible for their own governance and as O'Brien and Down (2002) stated before, educational management has taken on a top-down approach that yields detrimental results, not only for the public perception of teachers' abilities, but also for the self-esteem of the teacher.

Similarly, neoliberal policy that prioritizes cost-cutting has also redefined the role of the teacher. With little access to teaching materials, including computers and other multimedia devices, the teacher has little choice but to resort to the curriculum that has been established for him or her. Without access to alternative forms of conveying information, their pedagogical diversity is weakened and they have thus been transformed into a drone, unable to practice alternative methods. Moreover, teachers in the poorest areas of Brazil must work with even more limited resources, as often their students are unable to afford their own notebooks and pens. When the even the resources in the classroom are scarce, the limitations of public education are compounded for those economically disadvantaged children.

Therefore, not only has the shift from equity to efficiency altered the culture of teaching, but it is responsible for reinforcing and reproducing social inequalities. As has been shown, the Brazilian education system promotes a cycle of injustice and inequality as the low-income students, unable to afford private primary and secondary schools, do not receive the quality education that allows them to compete with more privileged students. This process by which the educational system decides who makes it into the best universities requires practically no effort or resources from the government.

Making poor, less prepared students more competitive would only require extra policy and money. Why would the government want to spend more money and resources making poorer students more competitive when there is already a system in place that automatically

selects the highest skilled students? Perhaps Brazil's growing presence in the internationally competitive markets and the increasing demand for skilled labor, paired with the brain drain effect that has filtered a large number of highly skilled individuals out of the country, Brazil will soon alter its approach to providing equitable access to quality education.

What would this type of education system, one that is truly equitable, of easy access and of high quality for all, look like? To answer this question, it seems appropriate to refer once again to Paulo Freire. First, it would be necessary to do away with the "banking" concept of education in which students are merely receptacles of information being transmitted by the all-knowing "oppressor", failing to recognize the students' histories and present needs. Instead, the teacher-student relationship is reconstructed into one of knowledge sharing and cooperative dialogue. Freire reminded us that a true education is one that eliminates social oppression, which he termed the pedagogy of the oppressed. Brazil should strive for an education that will prioritize the identities of teachers' lives as well as those of their students and support them in implementing what Freire called a 'libratory education' for all.

Second, the education system must desist from considering money and profit of primary interest. Education is not equitable if those who have less continue to have less as a result of the structure of the education system. Finally and perhaps most importantly, curriculum and pedagogy must be transformed into that which promotes critical inquiry and problem-posing education. This type of education involves constant communication between teacher and student. It is an attempt to motivate the student to critically analyze the world (Freire, 2000), and his or her position in it, as it is constantly changing and transforming.

Once these conditions are met, Freire assumes, teachers and students will be liberated from the oppression that changing ideological conditions permit. In the context of teacher

absenteeism, teachers will no longer be disconnected from their work as new forms of pedagogy and curriculum allow them to exercise their creative abilities and become more connected and committed to the teaching profession and to the students. As the “banking” concept, which is largely represented by the mandated curriculum for high stakes testing, is done away with, teachers will form new relationships with their schools and with their students, as well as with their own conscience as they recognize their potential as effective teachers and find a heightened sense of self-esteem, professionalization and confidence.

Likewise, as the education system is transformed into a catalyst bringing the underprivileged out of poverty and providing them with new opportunities, the teacher will become a valued medium by which educational goals are achieved. With such a transformation in the perception of role of the teacher in larger society, other changes are likely to follow. Perhaps classrooms will become better stocked with materials, schedules rearranged so that teachers do not waste time and energy in transit and salaries raised in order to justify higher expectations and increased teacher training. Many of the barriers that prevent teachers from attending work now, such as heavy traffic and an excessive sense of job stability, will become inconsequential as salary and the social value placed on the teaching profession is improved.

Not only will these developments benefit teachers, but undoubtedly students as well. Teacher absenteeism has been shown to negatively impact student performance. As the traditional model of education is based on teacher-student interaction, productive time in the classroom is lost when the teacher is absent. This is due to the fact that when a teacher is consistently present, he or she is able to establish a routine for learning and norms of behavior. Even when a substitute teacher is provided, learning suffers as students take time in creating

effective and trusting relationships with the new teacher. Additionally, substitute teachers more often than not are under-qualified and inexperienced (Tavares, Camelo and Kasmirski, 2009).

If a teacher misses one day, overall student performance is not affected. But there is evidence showing that when teachers consistently are absent, student performance on proficiency exams is affected and that the effect is greater among students who are already academically behind and from low-income families (Tavares, Camelo and Kasmirski, 2009). But obviously teacher absenteeism is not the lone factor affecting student performance and the overall quality of education in Brazil; nor should it be considered one of the core problems. Rather it stands together among many other factors that are a result of poverty, social inequality, financial realities and political priorities that impact various aspects of education in Brazil. With so many issues to contend with, how does one begin to develop a plan to alter the situation?

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to develop a response to the question at the end of the previous chapter, it is prudent to first ask the following: what is the purpose of education in the 21st century?

Education, since its beginning, has served as a means to develop a skilled workforce that meets the demands of the government and consumer needs and wants. Additionally, education systems around the world have been depended upon to develop good citizens who contribute positively to society. While these primary objectives of education have not changed over time, the skills that are required of the 21st century workforce certainly have. For example, as the world becomes more economically globalized, skills such as innovation, collaboration, problem-solving and self-direction are becoming increasingly valuable as attributes for increasing students' competitive edge in a global marketplace (Cisco, 2007).

With such a critical reliance on education for human well-being and national productivity, it is imperative that students receive access to quality education. Indeed access to education should be linked to quality of education. These two characteristics cannot be separated. While access to education, across rural and metropolitan boundaries as well as across income brackets, is important, simple access is not enough. Only an education system that is accessible and also high in quality will be that which “provides a way out of the vicious cycle whereby endemic poverty limits educational standards, constrains economic development and drives away talent, thereby exacerbating a nation’s economic woes (Cisco, 2007).” Education has become one of the high priorities in the twenty first century. A number of nations have engaged in school reform programs to meet this demand. China, for example, expanded access to

schooling for more than 12 million students between 1999 and 2004 and is now focusing on policies that improve the quality of education (Cisco, 2007)

Traditionally, it has been assumed that the key to improving educational quality is found in the quantity of money that country spends on education. However some of the lowest performing countries are also some of the highest spenders on education. Research by the OECD in 2004 shows that the countries that spend the most on education but perform the worst include the United States, Italy and Austria, while the countries that spend the least but have higher performance are, among others, Korea, Sweden, Japan, Finland and Australia. What the countries in the latter group do well, that the former group does not, is that they effectively target their limited funds to what has been demonstrated to have the biggest effect: the quality of teachers and the teaching they provide (Cisco, 2007).

According to Barber and Mourshed (2007), the best performing school systems in the world, aside from focusing on improving instruction, do three things well. First and second, they attract the right people to become teachers and they develop these people into effective instructors. Finland is one example of a country spends less on education but invests mostly in attaining good teachers, improving curriculum and achieving high accountability. This is all built on the country's tradition of having high respect for education and teachers, which is actively promoted by the government. Third and finally, these countries put in place systems and targeted support to ensure that every child is able to benefit from excellent instruction (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). Since most countries around the world, including the highest performers in education, have some degree socio-economic inequality, addressing the inequities and ensuring that all children have access to excellent instruction is an important source of success. Therefore,

a 21st century education policy and curriculum which addresses these inequities is one that responds to the socio-economic realities outside of the classroom.

Teachers must be supported in able to implement different teaching styles for different learning contexts and to enable their students from different cultural and academic backgrounds to learn from one another. But as we have seen, this type of pedagogy would be implemented with difficulty in a country like Brazil, as opposed to Finland, where many public school teachers are faced with a lack of physical space, scarce and malfunctioning teaching resources and more importantly, the challenge of a society and government that does not support the esteem of the teacher nor the value of the teaching profession.

Brazil's public education system generally does not recruit individuals with the best teaching potential, nor does it sufficiently develop its teachers into effective professionals (Louzano, Moriconi, Rocha and Portella, 2009). Instead its education policy promotes low levels of motivation and high rates of absenteeism; two factors that greatly hinder the achievement of high quality education for all students. As I have argued in this thesis, teacher absenteeism primarily affects educational quality when little learning is likely to take place as a result of the lack of the consistent presence of the permanent teacher and the familiar and established trusting relationship that is forged with the students. But teacher absenteeism can also affect educational access and school completion rates.

Implications for equitable access are represented by the fact that teacher absenteeism is more prevalent in schools serving lower-income communities. Therefore, teacher absenteeism compounds the many disadvantages already faced by students in poor areas. In addition, poor educational quality, resulting in part from an absent or unmotivated teacher, discourages parents from making the sacrifices necessary to send their children to school (Rogers and Vegas, 2009).

Given that public education is normally provided without charge, as it is in Brazil (Birdsall, 1996), such sacrifices are not defined by direct monetary cost through the payment of tuition, but rather by indirect costs related to the income forgone when the child attends school. For example in developing and developed countries, many families are faced with the need for labor support from the children, either in the form of supplemental income from paid work outside the home, or as unpaid labor in the household.

If educational success hinges on the quality of the teaching force, then Brazil has to improve or reform its education system. The country has to implement education policies that will sufficiently fund education and improve the working conditions of teachers as well as increase their salaries. It is no mystery what is preventing the existence of highly professional and committed teachers. This thesis has outlined several specific factors that decrease the overall effectiveness of the public school teacher in Brazil. As I have shown, salary, class size and social value of the teaching profession are perhaps the primary factors affecting teacher absenteeism and educational quality.

With such large class sizes, teacher morale and motivation are decreased and teachers are unable to provide individualized attention to students. Lack of physical space and resources prohibits the implementation of varied pedagogical methods and the self confidence of the teacher and his or her confidence in the performance of the students is negatively affected. In the discussion of salary, this thesis explained how low salary has forced teachers to acquire jobs outside of their profession, just to meet their economic obligations. With vacation time becoming financially and practically unfeasible for teachers, since many feel that that time must be spent working, they become fatigued and ill, and discouraged. Low salary also contributes to the

perception that teaching is for individuals who are incapable of achieving success in professions with higher social standing.

But low salary is just one indication of low social value for the teaching profession. Lack of funding from the government, scarcity of materials and large class sizes were all seen by the interview participants as evidence of the status of teachers and teaching in Brazilian society. This thesis has also shown how these conditions are also indications of the influence of larger forces that are suppressing the potential of progress in providing access to quality education in Brazil and around the world. These forces are neoliberal in nature. Neoliberal policies are antithetical to democratic transformation education that can improve all people's lives. So then not only are they tangible obstacles that policy makers must be aware of, but education cannot hope to be improved until the underlying causes of the current situation are realized.

Historically, the tendency to neglect women's working conditions in the past has certainly had an effect on the current conditions in teaching, a profession that continues to be dominated by a female presence. The sexist attitudes towards women's work and the lack of concern for female labor in the past have certainly contributed to the decreased levels of autonomy and control that teachers today, both men and women, experience in the classroom. Likewise, neoliberal ideology has redefined the role of the teacher as well as that of education in larger Brazilian society. The current education system in Brazil promotes a situation where the teacher's main function is to meet the demands of the standardized tests, a phenomenon that has an adverse impact on teachers' work and students' success. This negates the values of democratic education and can perpetuate social inequalities. While few students in the public school system are successful in obtaining a high quality university education, the majority are left with limited educational and professional opportunities.

So then, with this information about what is preventing the improvement of education in Brazil, we return to the question at the end of chapter four: what steps must Brazil take towards achieving an idyllic education system? As I have already alluded to this question, maybe a more appropriate question is now: what must be the characteristics of a Brazilian education system that will represent the ideals of a democratic society?

Political philosophy associates democracy with two essential ideas: participation and education, which some refer to simply as information. The association between these two principles is this: participation represents the quantitative nature of democracy, while education is associated with the qualitative aspect (Dantas et. al., 2010). Thus, a democracy is not one that is true unless all citizens, regardless of their income, race, or social standing, are able to obtain an education that provides them with the capital necessary to participate politically, socially and economically at the same level. A democratic education system will be one that no longer relegates the poor to an interminable cycle of poverty and under-achievement throughout their lives. A better education system for Brazil will be one that helps the Brazilian poor and underprivileged out of poverty and allows them to compete with Brazilians at all income levels for the best education, the best jobs and overall equal opportunities.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Katrina Alliene Deely graduated from Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Spanish Language and Literature. After graduating, Katrina traveled throughout South America for five months and furthered her interest in Latin American culture. Upon her return, she relocated to Champaign, Illinois, to pursue graduate study in Latin American Studies, with a focus on Brazil and Portuguese language. After completing her degree, Katrina hopes to live and work in the United States. She is currently searching for employment in the international management and global services sectors.